"Aaron Copland's Piano Sonata (1942)-
an Analysis"

by Roger Admiral (M.MUS.)

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Department of Music for acceptance, an essay entitled "Aaron Copland's Piano Sonata (1942) - An Analysis" submitted by Roger James Admiral in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music in Applied Music.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

"AARON COPLAND'S PIANO SONATA - AN ANALYSIS"

BY

ROGER JAMES ADMIRAL

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THE PIANO SONATA BY AARON COPLAND

INTRODUCTION

After her first reading of Aaron Copland's Piano Sonata, Nadia Boulanger wrote, "It is a very serious work, meditative in character." [Copland and Smit 1979: 1]. Considered a major contribution to the piano literature of the twentieth century, Copland's sonata, in itself, displays a continuum of highly individualized expressive compositional concepts. The Piano Sonata, as an extension of developments in piano sonata writing from the late classical and romantic epochs, will be discussed in the context of biographical information about Copland, a brief survey of historic developments in piano sonata writing, an identification of relevant compositional elements found in Copland's style, a detailed analysis of the work, and some consideration of aspects of performance.

AARON COPLAND - THE COMPOSER

A foremost American composer, Aaron Copland was born 1900 in Brooklyn, New York, where he studied composition with Rubin Goldmark from 1917 to 1921. From 1921 to 1924 he continued his studies with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, being one of the first of many American composers to study in France. Since then he has been active in the United States as a composer, conductor, pianist, writer and educator.

Copland has composed in a variety of genres including

music for the theatre, ballet and film. Much of his music, like Rodeo (1942) and Appalachian Spring (1943/44), for example, uses material based on American folksong; however, about half of his output comprises major works for the concert stage, like the Third Symphony (1944-1946) and the Nonet (1960) and other chamber works for example. Compositions for piano can be found throughout his whole career. The three major works in this category are the Piano Variations (1930), the Piano Sonata (1942) and the Piano Fantasy (1957).

The Piano Sonata was written over a period of two years from 1939 to 1941, when Copland was living in South America. It was commissioned by and dedicated to the American playwright Clifford Odets. The premiere performance was given by John Kirkpatrick in January 1943 in a successful Town Hall performance in New York City.

PIANO SONATAS

It was the opinion of Rubin Goldmark, already mentioned earlier, that " Sonata Form was a composer's highest goal ." [Perlis 1986: 330]. Copland thought of the Sonata as "dramatic - a kind of play being acted out with plenty of room for self-expression." [ibid.]

The term sonata originally referred to a "sound piece," usually a multi-movement instrumental work. In the piano sonatas of Haydn and Mozart we find the crystallization the

Classical Sonata Form, usually in three or four movements. Although the four-movement form is rather dominant in symphonic and chamber works, keyboard sonatas very often have the fast-slow-fast three movement form.

The first movement of a sonata consists of three main sections, consisting of an exposition, development section and recapitulation. In the exposition, two contrasting ideas or themes are heard; the first theme is stated in the tonic key, then is followed by a transition which modulates usually to the dominant key in which the second theme is cast. The development section normally develops motives from the exposition and modulates to various tonal centers leading into the recapitulation where the two original themes from the exposition are restated in the tonic key. The slow contrasting second movement is usually an Andante or Adagio in a related key, often in A-B-A song form, while the last movement is in Sonata, Rondo or Sonata-Rondo Form in the tonic key, although dance forms (e.g. Menuet) and theme and variations are sometimes found here as well. Of course there are occasional deviations from these schemes mentioned above.

Beethoven used similar multi-movement structures, but strove for a deeper individual expression than his predecessors. He also developed the piano sonata structure by integrating motivic material from the first movement in later movements (e.g., Op.53, op. 101 et al.). Motivic

unity, cyclic structure, and thematic metamorphosis were further developments found in such works as Schubert's Wanderer Fantasy op.15, Liszt's B-minor Sonata and Franck's A-major Sonata for Violin and Piano.

Other composers used narrative structures or philosophical ideas as a basis for their piano sonatas. Examples of this are Clementi's Didone abbandonato op.50, Liszt's "Aprés une lecture de Dante, fantasia quasi sonata," Alkan's Sonata op. 33 (four movements representing four stages in man's life) and Ives' Concord Sonata.

In the twentieth century, Scriabin and Medtner experimented with one-movement sonatas. Other composers such as Prokofieff, Hindemith, Stravinsky, Bartók, Dutilleux, Barber and Ginastera went back to conventional multi-movement structures while using a contemporary harmonic and rhythmic language. Some composers abandoned tonality and/or used aleatoric devices making the sonata form inappropriate in the traditional sense.

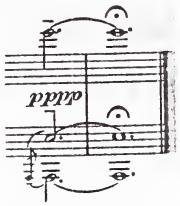
Copland's piano sonata is unique in pre 1945-music in that it is one of the few piano sonatas to continue where Liszt, Schubert and Franck, as mentioned above, left off. The piano sonata employs cyclic structure and is unified through rigid motivic and harmonic consistency. Although it does not have extra-musical ideas attached to it, it does have a sense of what Copland would call "a drama being played out." There will be more about this later in the essay.

STYLISTIC ASPECTS

Before analysing the sonata's structure, it is necessary to create a stylistic context from which one can view the analysis. Several relevant aspects of Copland's style should be mentioned: chordal structures, jazz-influenced rhythms and economic use of material.

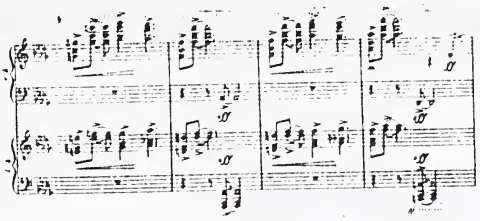
There is an abundance of chordal writing in the Piano Sonata. The chords usually consist of major or minor triads, but in a large variety of constructions. Through spacing, ommission of chord tones, doubling or tripling of notes, polytonal harmonies and major/minor ambiguity, Copland creates his own individual vocabulary of chordal writing. Generally there are many examples in Copland's music of sparse widely spaced chords as seen in this example from the end of the third movement of the sonata. Only the interval of a perfect fifth confirms the A-flat harmony:

Ex.1 Third movement, m. 171



In other instances, Copland uses widely spaced chords with thirds in extreme registers. Thirds used in the lower registers create dense sonorities which - particular to this sonata - contrast with the widely spaced chords of the third movement.

Ex.2 First movement, mm. 201-204

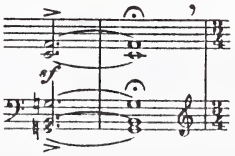


Through emphasis on particular chord notes, Copland draws attention away from the root of the harmony. In this example of a B-flat major chord, the third is quadrupled, the fifth doubled, but the root is represented only by one note:

Ex.3 First movement, m. 30

By adding non-chord notes Copland sometimes obscures the tonal identity. In the following example, the last chord of the first theme of the first movement, Copland uses a B-flat and F to indicate a B-flat tonal center, but obscures it by placing a G as the lowest note of the chord and adding a C in the middle. This particular chord is derived from and has the same function as the B-flat minor chord in measure two.

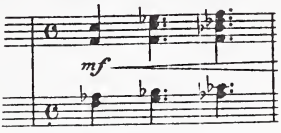
Ex.4 First movement, m. 5



The frequent use of polytonality creates an ambiguous quality in some passages and in the piece as a whole. Here

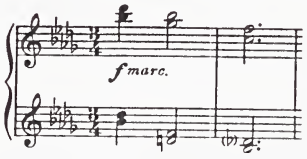
the chord contains simultaneously A-flat minor and B-flat Minor sonorities which are also the main tonal centers of the sonata:

Ex.5 Third movement, m. 95



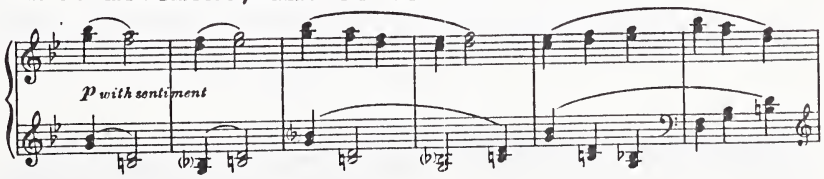
Major/minor ambiguity is another distinct characteristic in much of the sonata. In the opening measures shown in the following example, the top line of the first three chords of the piece outlines a B-flat minor triad. However, in the lower register there is a D-natural in the second chord which indicates B-flat major in spite of the B-flat minor mode of the first and third chords:

Ex.6a First movement, mm. 1-2



This type of harmonization permeates the work. It is also the beginning of a consistent use of the interval of a minor third, particularily in the lower register:

Ex.6b First movement, mm. 58-63



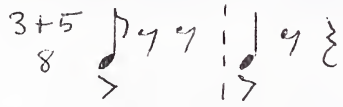
There are two rhythmic elements idiosyncratic to

Copland's style, that should be mentioned here: asymmetrical rhythm and written out rubatos. In an article written in 1927, Copland talks about jazz rhythms and predicts that more and more composers will exploit these rhythms in their music. He also mentions the notation of jazz rhythms.

The foxtrot has the following rhythm:

Copland notates this rhythm as:

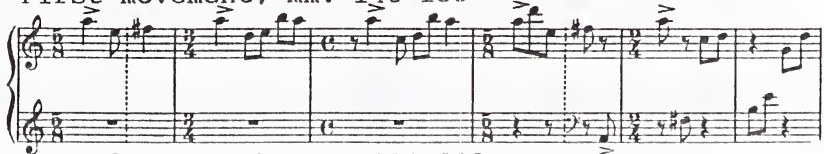
In this way the eighth notes are grouped as 3+3+2. Similarly Copland notates the Charleston rhythm as:



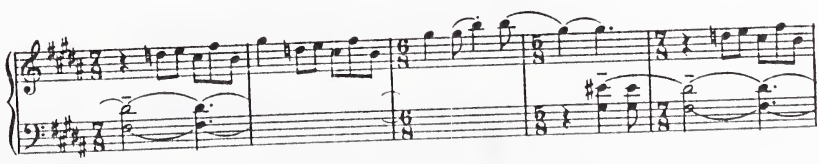
[Copland 1927: 9]

The asymmetrical groupings shown above can be traced in Copland's Piano Sonata, particularly in the development section of the first movement and throughout the second movement. In the next two examples the eighth note is the basic unit and is grouped in measures of $\frac{5}{8}, \frac{3}{4}, \frac{4}{4}, \frac{2}{4}, \frac{7}{8}, \frac{6}{8}$, etc.:

Ex.7a First movement, mm. 148-153



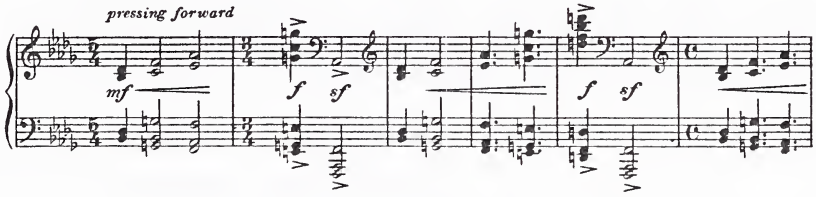
Ex.7b Second movement, mm. 294-298



The constant change of meter creates a difficult performance problem, which will be discussed later.

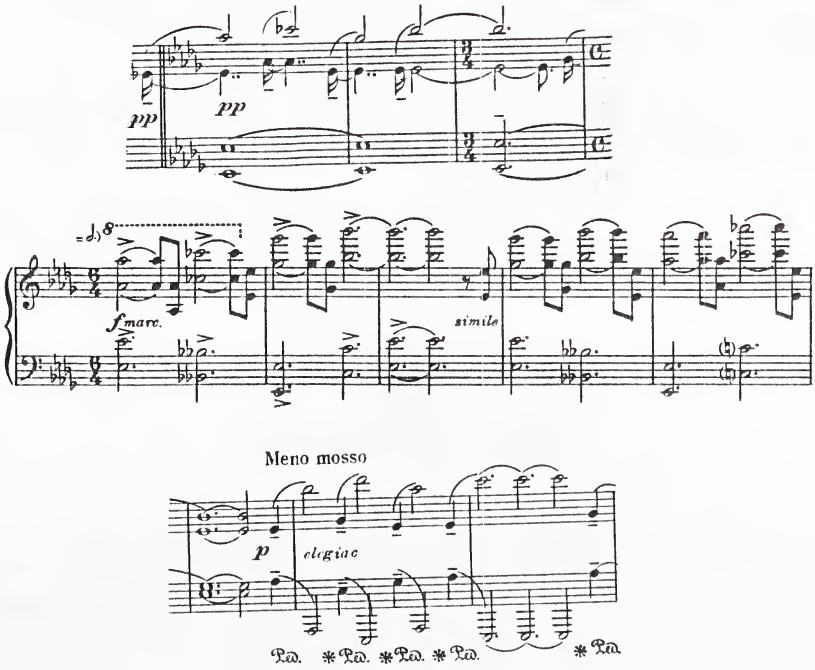
Another facet of Copland's rhythmic style is the process of lengthening or shortening note values to create the sense of rubato. In passages such as the following, the changing note values are used to emphasize the linear expansion and the "pressing forward":

Ex.8a First movement, mm. 26-31



In the third movement motion is slowed in stages by lengthening note values for similar figurations:

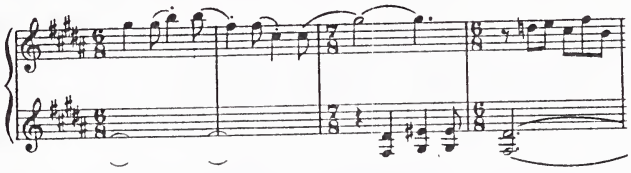
Ex.8b Third movement, mm. 119-121, 136-140, 154-156



Copland is usually very concise in his piano writing. One cannot find Chopinesque ornamentation or the virtuosic arabesques as found, for example, in Ravel's piano music. A passage in Copland's music that may appear to be subordinate to the main idea can very well be of importance by being related to motivic development or cellular construction. In the Piano Sonata the intervallic "cell" of a third permeates the texture (cf. Ex.6b).

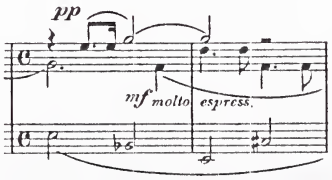
In the second movement one can speculate that Copland uses parallel major sixths as inversions of minor thirds to punctuate the main idea:

Ex.9 Second movement, mm. 11-14



In the third movement what begins as a subordinate figure later becomes important as a modulating device. The four notes in the lower register form a diminished triad (which consists of two minor thirds):

Ex.10 Third movement, mm. 34-35



The consistent use of the third as a building block creates a unity in the sonority and structure of the sonata.

Similarily Copland uses a four-note cell in the Piano Variations and a ten-note row in the Piano Fantasy. While Schoenberg and his followers devised twelve-tone rows that would unify music outside tonality, Copland used the features of tonality and unified his works with cells of fewer than twelve notes.

ANALYSIS

Although the Piano Sonata employs tonal reference points, the lack of functional harmony in the work would make a conventional harmonic analysis insufficient. The concept of modulation and the labeling of pivot chords as used in conventional harmonic analysis cannot be considered convincing analytical tools in this case. Furthermore certain parts of the sonata could be called bitonal, increasing the problems of a conventional analytical approach. Instead one might refer to the harmonic movement within the sonata simply as a fluctuation between "stability" and "instability." The following analysis of the three movements and of the sonata as a whole is based on this premise.

First movement

The first movement is in standard sonata form with clearly defined exposition, development and recapitulation sections. The movement's tonal reference point is B-flat minor.

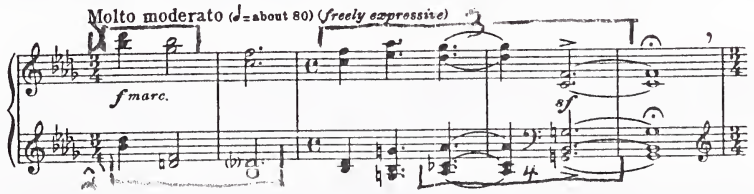
Figure 1

EXPOSITION	DEVELOPMENT	RECAPITULATION
mm.1-57, 58-95	96-122, 123-196	197-221, 222-243
1st theme, 2nd theme	1st theme, 2nd theme	1st theme, 1st and 2nd combined
$B^{\flat}$-, g-, d-, f-, c-, e-	C-, A- (d-) $B^{\flat}$-	, $D^{\flat}$-, $B^{\flat}$-

In the first five bars of the first movement one can find the rhythmic, harmonic and motivic seeds for the rest of the movement. With his economic compositional style, Copland uses several fragments of the first theme to construct the entire movement. The main motives are:

1) The rhythm of the quarter note on the first beat followed by a half note.
2) The pattern of mixing major and minor modes by altering the third
   of the chord (in this case, D-natural and D-flat).
3) The four-note pattern of the top line in mm.3 and 4.
4) The stepwise contrary motion of the chords in m.3.

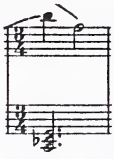
Ex.11 First movement, mm. 1-5



The exposition of the first theme (mm.1 - 57) already shows considerable development of the initial motives. In mm. 10-25 motive no.3 is developed but remains for the most part harmonically stable. However, in m.16 Copland already foreshadows the significance that A-flat minor will assume in

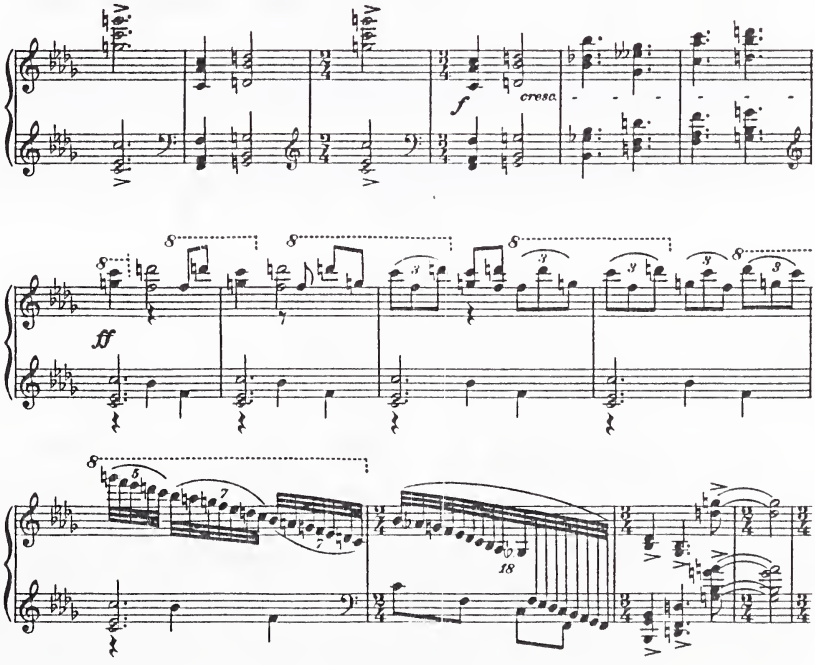
the whole sonata by combining the A-flat minor triad with a B-flat descending to F-natural. This figuration is reiterated in mm. 20, 22 and 24.

Ex.12 First movement, m. 22



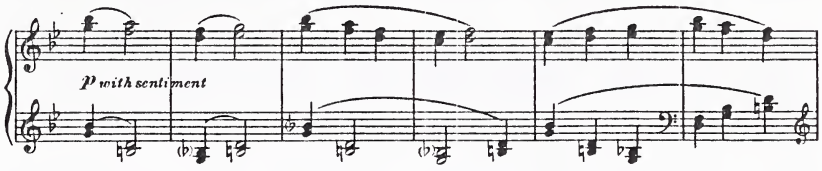
In mm. 26-57 the theme is developed further, first by linear expansion (mm. 26-33) and later by introducing C-minor in m. 38, which is juxtaposed with B-flat major in mm. 44-47. The dynamic level builds up to ff and climaxes with a five octave descending scale in mm. 48-49.

Ex.13 First movement, mm. 38-51



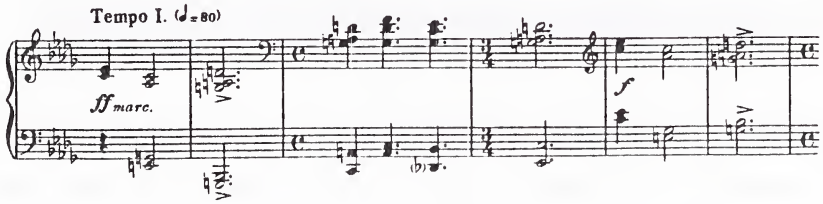
After a gradual cessation of movement, the second theme enters at m.58. This theme can be interpreted as a further development of the first theme.

Ex.14 First movement, mm. 58-63



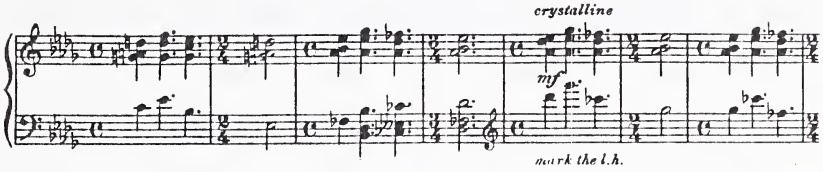
Copland uses the rhythmic feature of m.1, whereby the lower voice is simply a transposition of that of m.1. From mm. 67 - 95, the second theme goes through four stages of metamorphoses via transposition and increasing figuration leading to the beginning of the development section which is marked ff marcato to underline its central importance.

Ex.15 First movement, mm. 96-101.



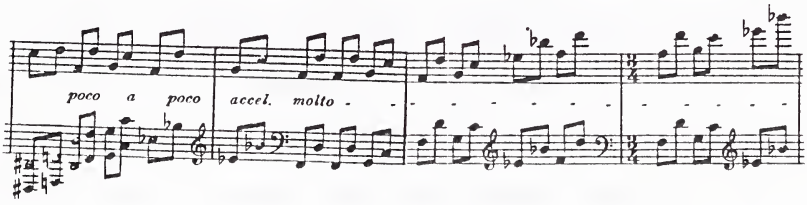
The beginning of the development section features the opening motive as marked in example 15 outlining the tonic and dominant of C-minor and altering the original melodic profile of the motive as presented in mm. 1/2. Copland develops motive no.3 in mm. 102 - 110 and indicates that the top line should be emphasized in a "crystalline" texture.

Ex.16 First movement, mm. 102-108



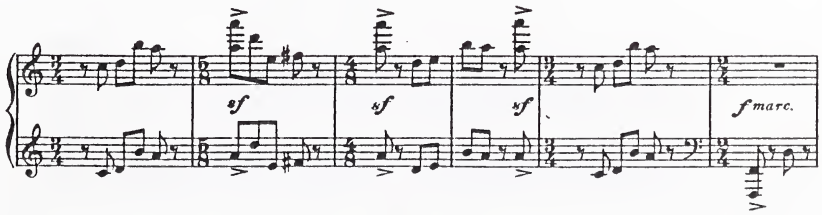
The second theme is developed from m. 123 to the recapitulation in m. 197. In m. 123 a new three-voice contrapuntal texture evolves, which gradually is transformed into a unison texture, accelerating to the allegro section starting in m. 133. Mm. 129 - 132 can be compared to the simultaneous C-minor- and B-flat major of mm. 44 -47 (cf. example 13).

Ex.17 First movement, mm. 129-132



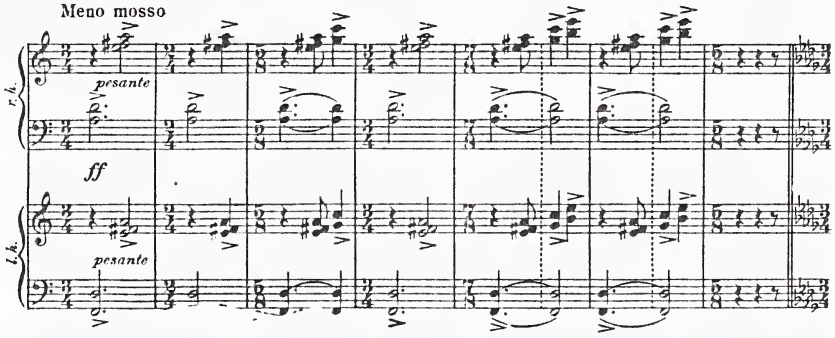
The allegro section combines the linear interval of a second with accented notes which could be interpreted as punctuation marks. As already mentioned in a previous chapter, this section utilizes jazz-influenced asymmetrical rhythms and displaced accents.

Ex.18 First movement, mm. 136-141



The allegro section ends in A-minor and is followed by a transition into the recapitulation. Copland arrests the preceding motion with a bar of silence in m. 189 and 6 measures marked "meno mosso" and "pesante."

Ex.19 First movement, mm. 190-196

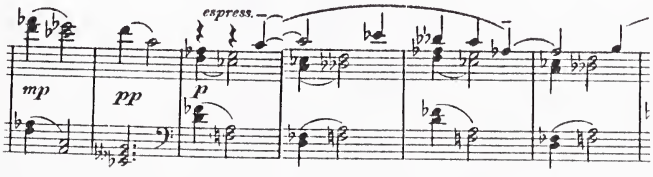


The passage in example 19 also serves as a transition back to the tonal reference point of B-flat via the common tones of D-natural and F-natural in the lowest register of mm. 190-195 and in the first measure of the theme (m. 197).

The beginning of the recapitulation is similar to the beginning of the movement, but the dynamic marking of fff and the expanded sonority creates a more "grandiose" character than the beginning.

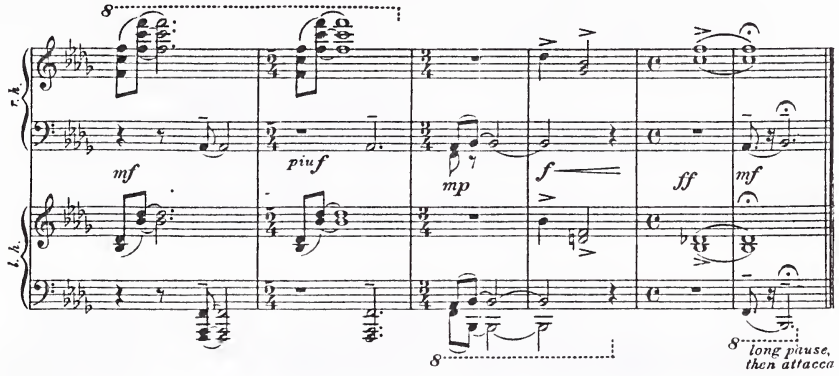
The entrance of the second theme in m. 222 occurs in D-flat minor. Here Copland emphasizes the interrelationship of the first and second theme by combining them.

Ex.20 First movement, mm. 222-227



The final statement (mm. 241-243) contains the tonal and rhythmic features of the opening measures of the Sonata. The linear interval of the second is also remembered and clearly differentiated from the first theme through subtle dynamic markings. All in all this constitutes a final cadence in B-flat minor.

Ex.21 First movement, mm. 238-243



Second movement

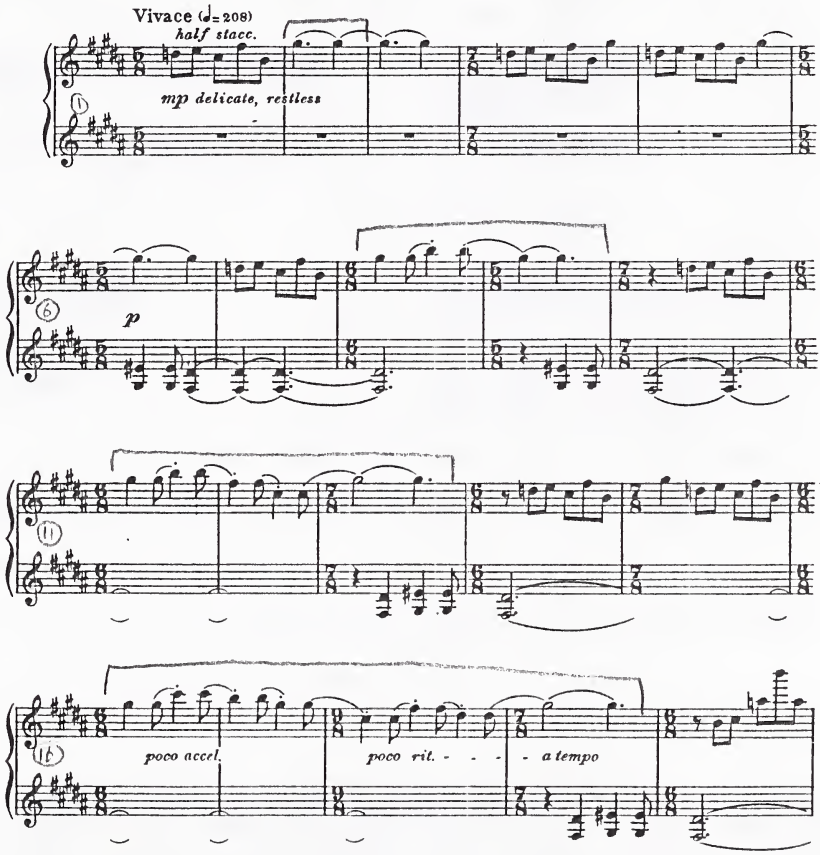
In contrast to the weighty chordal writing of the first movement, the "delicate, restless" vivace movement is cast in a primarily thin texture and of a very lively character with its jazz-influenced rhythms. The structure of this movement is in three parts, centered around G-sharp minor (which enharmonically is A-flat minor, a significant key area in the first movement).

Figure 2

A SECTION	B SECTION	A' SECTION: CODA
mm. 1 - 186	187 - 222	223 - 305, 306-310
G# -	G(♭) +/-	G# -

The second movement exemplifies organic motivic growth and variation. Note how the G-sharp of m. 2 is expanded in each successive appearance (mm. 8-9, 11-13, 16-19). These characteristic expansions are especially marked in the following example.

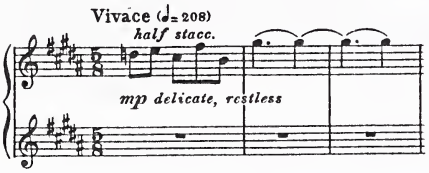
Ex.22 Second movement, mm. 1-20



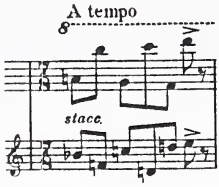
It is interesting to observe, how the opening motive is developed in what one could call continuous permutations from m. 1 to m. 186.

Ex.23 Second movement

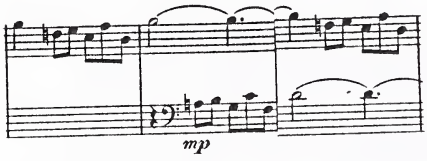
a mm. 1-3



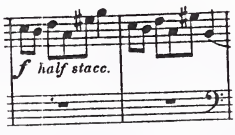
d m. 71



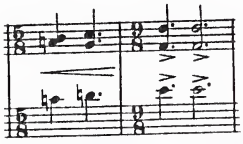
b mm. 29-31



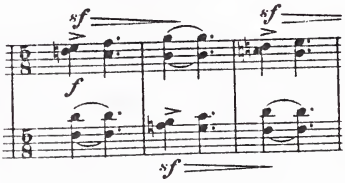
e mm. 79-80



c mm. 61-62

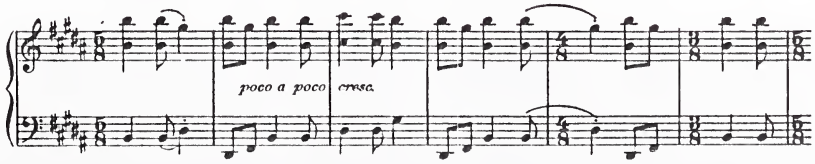


f mm. 90-92



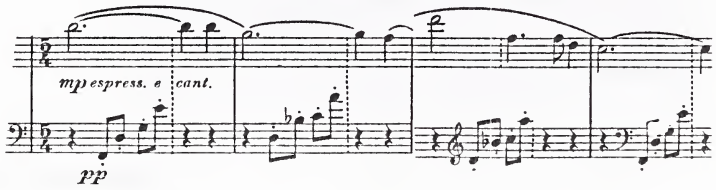
In passages such as mm. 40-52 and mm. 117-125, Copland emphasizes G-sharp minor through repetition of the pitches of G-sharp and B-natural in the high register. This also relates to the motive as heard in m.8 (cf. example 22).

Ex.24 Second movement, mm. 42-47



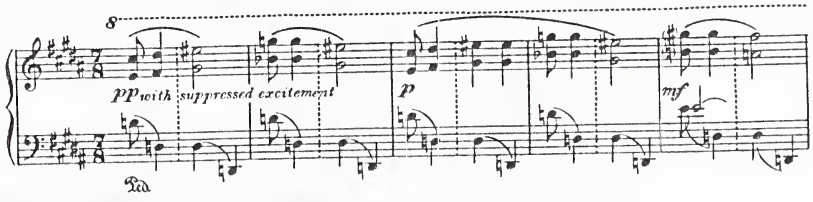
As already mentioned before, an important aspect of Copland's texture in this movement is his use of parallel sixths as a means of punctuation of the motivic activity in the upper register (cf. example 22, m. 6 and m. 7). There seems to be a hidden relationship of inversion between the thirds in the first movement and the sixths in the second. Beginning in m. 187 the sixths take on an arpeggiated form to be juxtaposed to a new idea which begins in m. 204.

Ex.25 Second movement, mm. 204-207



With an effective transition passage from mm. 223-232 the original motive reappears. The transition is marked pp "with suppressed exitement" and uses the "restless," unstable character of a repeated diminished triad (D-natural, E-sharp and G-sharp).

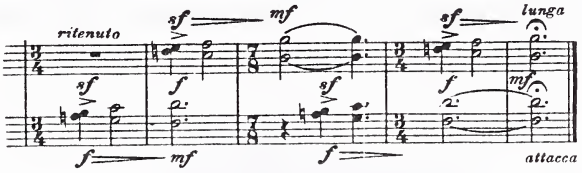
Ex.26 Second movement, mm. 223-227



The return of the A-section (mm. 233-305) is stylistically similar to the first A-section; only here Copland moves backwards from the complex permutation to the

original motive which, because of the previous figurative activity, now sounds calm and simple. This simplicity is reinforced by a short coda where the previous irregular meter is replaced by the time signature of creating what John Kirkpatrick called the effect of "something familiar suddenly seen in its true light." [Kirkpatrick 1942: 248]

Ex.27 Second movement, mm. 306-310



Third movement

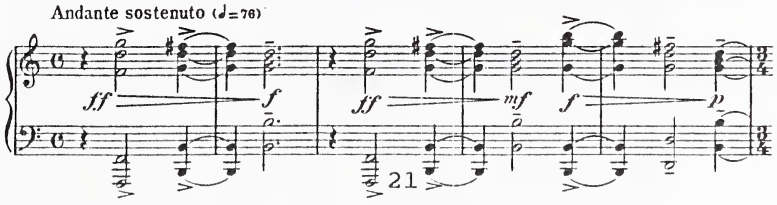
The third movement utilizes two compositional features: the reappearance of material from previous movements and the contrast between harmonically stable and unstable sections.

Figure 3

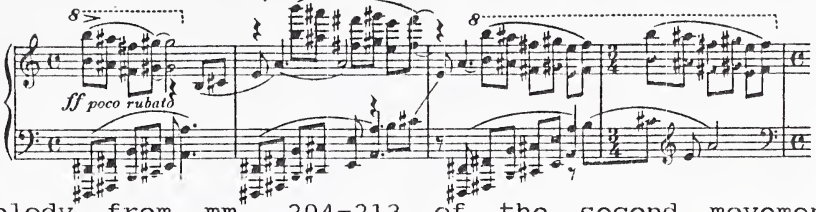
mm.1-33	34-45	46-62	63-88	89-98	99-118	119-135, 136-147	148-171
motive from 2nd mov't B section	motive combined with motive [A]	motive [B]	motive [A] shifting tonal centers	1st theme of 1st mov't	motive [A] shifting tonal centers	motive [B] motives [A] and [B] combined	1st theme of 1st mov't, motive [B]
G+	E-	A+		F-		$A^{\flat}$-	$A^{\flat}$-

After some introductory chords similar in contour to a passage of the first movement,

Ex.28a Third movement, mm. 1-5

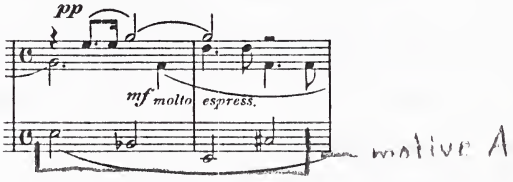


Ex.28b First movement, mm. 123-126



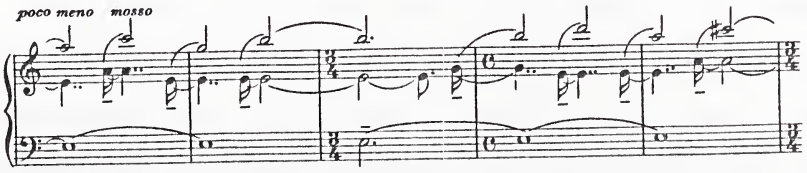
the melody from mm. 204-213 of the second movement is presented again, emphasizing the unity of the work. This melody is heard once, alone, beginning in m. 6, then in imitation with a free melodic inversion in m. 19 and finally with an important motive in the lower register beginning at m. 34.

Ex.29 Third movement, mm. 34-35



Enharmonically the notes E-natural, B-flat and C-sharp of this motive can be respelled A-sharp, C-sharp and E-natural, which forms a diminished triad, another important example of the use of minor thirds in the construction of this sonata. This motive (labelled as motive A) with its diminished characteristic contrasts with the "stability" of motive B that follows beginning in m. 46.

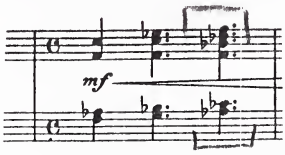
Ex.30 Third movement, mm. 46-50



Over an E-natural pedal which is held for eight measures, a new theme "elegaic" and "restful" in nature is heard at a pp dynamic level. The static quality of this passage appears like an antithesis to the preceding more "mobile" diminished triad.

After the tonality of A-major is delineated in the section from mm. 46-62 motive A reappears in a section that changes the tonal center through an ascending line of octaves forming a pattern of rising whole-tones culminating in B-flat in m. 71. A similar ascent occurs in mm. 79-88 moving from G-natural up to F-natural constituting also a strong climax in fff. This gradual increase of intensity sets the stage for the "dramatic" reappearance of the first theme of the first movement (m. 89). This effectively unifies the sonata as a cyclic entity. The polytonal chords of A-flat minor and B-flat minor are also reintroduced summarizing the tonal centers of the first and third movements, demonstrating a further cyclic element.

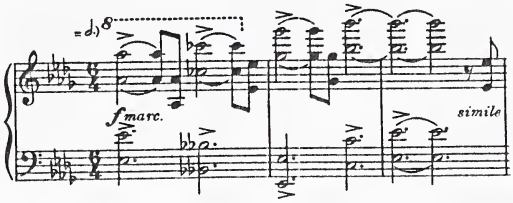
Ex.31 Third movement, m. 95



Beginning in m. 99 motive A appears in a passage similar to that from mm. 79-88, while motive B returns in A-flat minor beginning at m. 119. Subsequently in m. 136 the two motives are combined and marked f marcato, but because

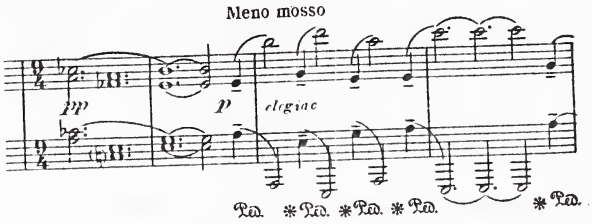
the diminished triad motive now contains two E-flats the A-flat minor tonal center is not really weakened.

Ex.32 Third movement, mm. 136-138



In m. 148 the first theme of the first movement is heard again and it seems to be subsumed in the chordal space of the final statement of the "elegaic" theme.

Ex.33 Third movement, mm. 153-156



From m. 119 to the end of the movement we find a slowing down, section by section, in tempo and harmonic rhythm. Important in this context is the lengthening of note values for similar figuration (see example 8b). Wilfred Mellers referred to this as the "quintessential expression of immobility." [Mellers 1987: 92] John Kirkpatrick wrote that this had the "effect of smoothing away the layers of material association to achieve inner concentration." [Kirkpatrick 1943: 249]

Another dimension also appears to be at work here-space in terms of pitches. In the first movement, as we have

seen, major and minor thirds constitute important compositional building stones in the form of closely spaced chords. For the sake of argument we will attribute an "inner turbulent" quality to this compositional device.

The second movement's main motive is a six-note wedge shaped idea that moves in expanding intervallic steps from a major second diatonically to a major sixth. One might create an abstract picture of the motive like this or , perhaps indicating a growth outward from the "dense turbulence" of the first movement. The third movement, as we have seen, contains many widely spaced chords with few notes spread over a large sound spectrum. This use of space allows the texture to be transparent and the notes to be easily discernible. One might call the entire sonata a journey from "turbulence" to "reconciliation" thereby creating the subjective experience of inner calm and peace.

ASPECTS OF PERFORMANCE

Copland's Piano Sonata is for the most part technically not difficult. There are, however, several points worth mentioning regarding performance.

In the first movement, because of the consistent use of parallel thirds in the texture, one wonders if Copland would not want them to be sounded in a neutral way as opposed to the romantic sound projection, which usually emphasizes the upper contour notes. However, in regard to the playing

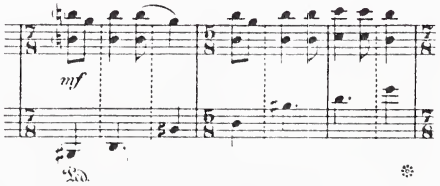
of chords in general, the variety of their construction seems to necessitate experimentation with tonal balance in order to contribute to the colour of the chords.

The main problem in the faster sections is rhythmic differentiation. A passage such as the one in example 7a requires careful practice to solidify the different rhythmic placements of notes, whose metric values are determined by bar lines and changes in meter.

Discussion of the third movement raises a point with respect to Copland's own style of playing. Regarding slow passages like those at the end of the piece, Arthur Berger describes a piano recital where Copland, playing his own music, "dwelt on every tone, as if to instil the last ounce of sonority." [Berger 1953: 44] While it might not be advisable to play too slowly in the more static passages of the third movement, there should be sufficient time for contemplating the sounds as to their intrinsic emotional value.

Copland leaves much of the pedalling to the performer. However, there are some examples of specific pedal indicactions designated to sustain harmony and expand the sonorities. They should be strictly observed..

Ex.34 Second movement, mm.118-122



CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that Copland's Piano Sonata is very unified due to its cyclic structure, its sense of overall tonality and its consistent use of the interval of a third. Also, the sonata exemplifies motivic transformation in a way similar to sonatas by Liszt, Franck and Bartók. The Piano Sonata should be recognized as an important contribution to the twentieth century piano sonata repertoire.

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